

September 26, 2011

## SPORTS SAVES THE WORLD

By Alexander Wolff

In grassroots programs involving tens of thousands of participants around the globe, visionaries are using athletics to tackle the most pressing problems of the developing world—from AIDS in Africa to violence in Rio. Can such projects make a lasting difference, or is the dream of salvation through sports too grandiose? SI senior writer **Alexander Wolff** set off on a yearlong journey to find the answer.

### BLOOD INTO GOLD

Custodio turned to boxing to avenge his father's murder, but Luta Pela Paz channeled his anger into discipline and purpose. He's now Brazil's light welterweight champion and a London 2012 hopeful.  
FABIO SEIXO



### VANCOUVER

**I ran into** Johann Olav Koss again in February 2010, at the Olympic oval in Richmond, B.C. The sight of Koss, then a temporary coach with Norway's speedskating team, transported me back 16 years instantly, happily.

I can't help it: Listmaking is a male thing, even more a sportswriterly thing, and I fastidiously rank Olympic Games. With its glitch-filled first week, the trucked-in snow and the fatal crash of a Georgian luger, the Vancouver edition will forever be an also-ran. The Winter Games of 1994, on the other hand, still surmount my desert-island alltime top five list of Olympics. Lillehammer abides with me not just because Koss won three gold medals and set three world records in three races; Dan Jansen finally skated to a gold himself; and 100,000 Norwegians camped overnight in the snow so they could cheer cross-country skiers with cowbells the next morning. It was the harmonious vibe, the intimate scale, the clean Scandinavian lines of the venues, even the crisp weather-as if the Norse gods had dropped a membrane over the town, sealing it off from the world's impurities.

The only breach of this hermetic idyll was on the pedestrian mall of Lillehammer's main street, where a few people solicited for a charity called Olympic Aid. They invoked Sarajevo, the Yugoslavian city that had hosted the Winter Games a decade earlier and, as a result of the war in the Balkans, remained under what would be the longest siege in modern history. The looping anthem of Sarajevo's suffering, Albinoni's *Adagio in G Minor*, haunted me every time I walked by. It seemed to whisper that, even as nature re-created a little patch of Eden for the playing of games, mankind still ginned up reminders of its fallen state.

And then the Perfect Olympics delivered its own latter-day god, a man to go forth into the Imperfect World and set it right. I'd watched Koss skate his triple at the Vikingskipet Oval. I'd heard him pledge his bonus money to Olympic Aid and challenge his countrymen to give 10 kroner each for every Norwegian gold medal, inspiring his government and fellow citizens to give \$18 million over 10 days. For this as much as anything else, SI named Koss its 1994 Sportsman of the Year, an award he shared with U.S. speedskater Bonnie Blair. My colleague E.M. Swift wrote the story about the Olympic champion from Norway with a "headful of dreams and almost a lifetime in which to accomplish them."

We were now 16 years into that life left to live. When I saw Koss at the Richmond Oval, I asked, How goes the battle?

Sport, Koss replied, is doing nothing less than trying to save the world. Olympic Aid, since renamed Right To Play, now reaches 700,000 children in 20 countries during any given week. But Koss's outfit is only one player among hundreds in a burgeoning global movement. Today the field known generally as Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) extends well beyond

nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as Right To Play. It attracts growing support from foundations and corporations, while governments and international agencies are eager to serve as partners to groups on the ground. And as the effectiveness of programs is more precisely measured, SDP's value as a tool for good is becoming more widely acknowledged. Even the stodgiest onlookers agree that sport "plays the hidden social worker," in the words of former champion miler Sebastian Coe, now chairman of the London 2012 organizing committee.

That is a good thing, for almost half the world's population is considered poor, and a full 1.4 billion people—one fifth of humanity, including more than half of all Africans—are extremely poor, living on less than \$1.25 a day. As maladies of plenty such as obesity, diabetes and heart disease afflict the developed world, and elite pro sports reek of excess, SDP is a sobering counterpoint, spreading health messages, pacifying communities in conflict, preparing refugees for resettlement and providing what experts consider the simplest means of promoting development: improved status for women. At the turn of this century, when the U.N. drew up its Millennium Development Goals to cut extreme poverty in half by 2015 and eliminate it entirely by '25, Koss and Right To Play led the way in determining how sport could best help.

On the morning of the 2010 Olympic opening ceremonies, across Vancouver at a symposium at the University of British Columbia, the former Canadian ambassador to the United Nations, Stephen Lewis, delivered a confession. Lewis, who had served the U.N. secretary general as an anti-AIDS adviser, had long been skeptical of the value of sports. But SDP had won him over. "[Koss] understood early that you could use play to convey messages that aren't available anywhere else," Lewis told his audience. "Sport has become a development philosophy. Who would have imagined that to be possible? What began as an instinct has now become a profound social cause."

I wanted to see how, exactly. So after the dousing of the Vancouver flame, I lit out for far corners of this Imperfect World in search of other friends of sport who, like Koss, had broken from their bubbles to heed the *Adagio* call of Lillehammer.



### UNDER SIEGE

Police officers from the Special Operations Battalion patrol the favelas in Rio de Janeiro to protect the area from drug traffickers and gangs.

FELIPE DANA/AP

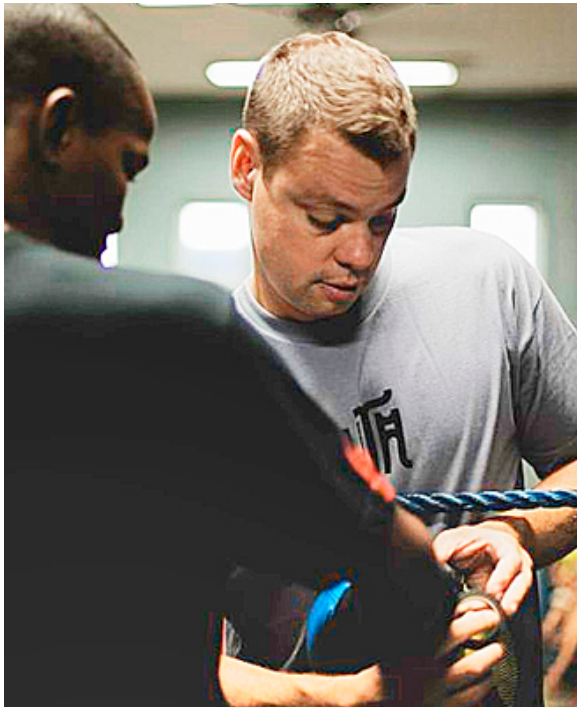
## RIO DE JANEIRO

**It's not** a classic hillside slum, but Complexo da Mare is easily one of Rio's largest favelas—a sprawling neighborhood of 135,000 people hard by the route visitors will travel between the airport and the beaches when they come to this city for the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics. Rival drug gangs recruit kids as foot soldiers and sort out differences with gunplay. Luke Dowdney has driven me into the favela beneath weltering electrical wires and past huddled walk-ups. He parks our car and we stroll a block. A boy of no more than 15 preens in an intersection, automatic weapon slung over one shoulder.

Dowdney, a former British universities light middleweight boxing champion, came to Brazil in 1995 to study street children in the northern city of Recife for his dissertation in social anthropology. He was haunted by the murder of two kids he had grown close to and by the words of a 12-year-old drug trafficker who told him, "I'm going to die young, but I'm going to live well." One day a group of glue-sniffing boys asked him to show them some boxing moves. "When they'd get in a stance, they'd leave the glue behind," says Dowdney, 38, "and a light went off in my head."

In 2000, Dowdney founded a boxing and martial arts program in Mare called Luta Pela Paz, or Fight for Peace, and five years later he opened a

training and educational center. On its first floor, boys and girls practice boxing, wrestling and the Brazilian martial art capoeira. In a suite of second-floor classrooms the same kids learn computer skills, citizenship and conflict resolution; they also practice martial arts in a third-floor matted dojo. Boxer Douglas Noronha, whose brother was shot to death in '01, is one of about 4,600 young Cariocas to go through the program. "You'd think I'd have become more violent," he tells me. "In fact, I've become a more controlled person. It's all about the self-confidence and discipline of not finding yourself in a position where, before you know it, somebody's got a gun."



### **PUNCHING IN**

Some 4,600 Cariocas have passed through Dowdney's program, learning not just martial arts but also citizenship and computer skills. FERNANDO YOUNG BRASILEIRO

Dowdney introduces me to another fighter, Roberto Custodio, who was 14 when his father was ordered out of the favela by a drug trafficker who was jealous of his relationship with a local woman. When he returned to look in on his family, which he supported as a bus driver, the drug lord settled the matter in his usual way, with bullets.

Figuring that fitness and martial arts would help him square accounts with his father's killer, Roberto turned to Luta Pela Paz. Then the unexpected happened. The program transformed his bloodlust into something altogether new. As he developed the discipline that boxing demands-and took the academic classes required of all participants-relatives marveled

that his anger gradually drained away. Last October, Roberto, now 24, won the light welterweight gold medal at the Brazilian championships, and he is likely to qualify for the London Olympics as a welterweight. "Our program isn't just about getting rid of energy," Dowdney tells me. "It's also about rigor and values. The disciplined fighter will always beat the overwrought fighter. *Luta* means fight, but it also means struggle, in a good way."

Dowdney hopes to develop a funding stream from a new line of fightwear and lifestyle clothing called Luta ([luta.co.uk](http://luta.co.uk)). "If the line hits, it becomes the engine," says Dowdney, who runs a second Fight for Peace center in East London that has trained 1,700 boxers. "We're not about being a traditional charity. It's like boxing: You get out what you put in. If you're not trained, you don't win. That's life. You've got to step up."

Last spring, as a crew filmed a commercial for the Luta brand in a ring set up in a warehouse at the edge of the favela, a gunfight broke out between police and traffickers. The film crew dove under the ring for cover. That's what favela dwellers such as Roberto Custodio deal with. Says Dowdney, "Luta is about celebrating the real heroes in the favelas, young people born into extraordinary adversity who get painted as victims when they're actually aspirational heroes."

## **TEL AVIV, JERUSALEM AND THE WEST BANK**

**When it** ventures to global trouble spots, basketball can flash a kind of diplomatic passport. In South Africa, hoops comes without the racial baggage of soccer (a largely black sport) or rugby (mostly white). In divided Cyprus it's loved equally by citizens of Turkish and Greek descent. In Northern Ireland it's regarded as neither a Gaelic game by Protestants nor a game of the British garrison by Catholics. All of which helps explain the success of Peace Players International (PPI), which has spent the past decade using basketball to build bridges among young people in divided communities.

In the Middle East such efforts face a challenge of another magnitude. Upon launching there in 2005, PPI easily found Israeli Arabs to mix with Jewish kids in its programs. But Palestinian parents in the Israeli-controlled West Bank balked at letting their boys and girls travel to Israel for integrated play. Meanwhile, poor coaching and inadequate facilities in the West Bank led kids there to fear that their lack of hoops competency would only bolster Israeli stereotypes of worthless Palestinians.



On a brilliant spring day in 2010, Brendan Tuohey flashes me a smile as he oversees a PPI youth tournament in a Tel Aviv park. "Five years ago we decided to build up the skills of Palestinian kids," says Tuohey, a former player at Colgate whose brother Sean had the idea for the organization. "It's a big breakthrough that players from [the Palestinian city of] Ramallah chose to get on the bus to come here today."



## **HOOP DRESSED**

Basketball dissolves social barriers for Palestinian girls in the West Bank as part of the Peace Players International initiative.

DAVID SILVERMAN/  
GETTY IMAGES  
FOR LAUREUS

Some parents on both sides of the Israel-Palestine divide still hesitate to let their kids enter PPI's programs—Jews out of safety concerns and Arabs because of cultural norms for girls. But the chance to get good coaching at no cost, plus uniforms and occasional travel, has enticed some 5,600 participants. "They all come for sport," PPI Middle East director Karen Doubilet tells me. "'Meet the other side' is just something they put up with in order to do what they really want to do."

Children ages 10 to 14 participate in PPI's "twinning" program, in which Jews and Arabs at first practice regularly in their home communities, then combine into mixed teams under two coaches (one Arab and one Jewish) and meet weekly throughout the school year. At 15 they're eligible to become PPI coaches themselves; last season two teams of 15- and 16-year-old Arab and Jewish girls competed in the Israeli first division under the PPI banner. Meanwhile, in hoops-deprived parts of the West Bank such

as Ramallah and nearby refugee camps, PPI continues to offer its "single-identity" program to boost the level of Palestinian basketball, provide constructive outlets for kids' energy and train coaches as leaders.

Once PPI gets them, most participants buy into the coexistence component. It's based on a curriculum, developed by a U.S.-based conflict-resolution think tank called the Arbinger Institute, that supplies strategies for exploring why one side stigmatizes the other and how to change those attitudes. "After Arbinger they might still clique up," says Heni Bizawi, who has played and coached in the program, "but according to different variables, like Jaffa versus Jerusalem instead of Arab versus Jew."

Peace Players has helped make a fan of Raneem Nashef, a 12-year-old Arab who lives in the West Jerusalem enclave of Beit Safafa. She'll wake up early to watch TV broadcasts involving her favorite player, Omri Casspi, the Jewish Israeli who plays for the Cleveland Cavaliers. Her mother, Lubna, who grew up despising the yellow and blue of Maccabi Tel Aviv, Casspi's old club, catches me by surprise: "My daughter feels Casspi represents her. She knows he comes from her part of the world."

In the seemingly intractable Arab-Israeli conflict, progress is measured in tiny steps. "A lot of people in my school don't like Arabs and don't know that I play PPI," says Naomi Goldstein, 14. "I don't tell them."

Amir Abu Dalu, 19, an Arab who's now a PPI coach, also keeps his counsel: "Otherwise I might get in trouble."

But a tiny step is a step just the same. First a bus ride, then a basketball game, ultimately the realization that someone you thought was your enemy makes a pretty good teammate. "In basketball it's easy to communicate," says Dalu. "You can play a game and connect, just like that."

## TORONTO

**Johann Olav Koss** runs Right To Play out of Canada's largest city, and University of Toronto professor and former Olympic distance runner Bruce Kidd has been a reliable sounding board for him. I've turned up at Kidd's office because SDP is one of his academic specialties, and I'm looking for a sense of where the movement has been and where it might go.

In the 19th century, English-speaking exporters of sport, freighted with ulterior motives such as imperialism and evangelism, held attitudes strikingly different from those of Luke Dowdney, Tommy Clark and Brendan



Tuohey. The Victorians took their "Games Ethic" from the playing fields of Eton and sent it overseas to "civilize" the ancestors of many of the very people engaged by SDP today.

Fast-forward to 1987, to Kenya and the Eastlands of Nairobi. A Canadian environmental worker named Bob Munro looks on as a handful of kids play with a soccer ball made of discarded shopping bags tied with bits of string. "Clean up the field," Munro tells them, "and I'll give you a real ball." Soon Munro launches the Mathare Youth Sports Association (MYSA), a soccer league with a blunt message: *If you do something, MYSA does something; if you do nothing, MYSA does nothing.* To join elite teams, players must pledge to perform thousands of hours of community service together each season. Those who organize cleanups, counsel peers in AIDS-prevention activities and coach or referee younger kids become eligible for scholarships. Teams can't take a field unless they clear it of trash-but earn points in the standings for doing so. Today MYSA, which is owned and run by the youths themselves and was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize in 2003 and '04, touches 25,000 young Kenyans at any given time with nested-in-sport programs in community building, health education and environmentalism.

Kidd points out that the recent rise of SDP coincides with the fall of apartheid as much as it follows from the efforts of Koss and MYSA. Activists who had led the international sports boycott that helped bring down the South African regime-Kidd among them-essentially asked, "What do we do now?" They rallied to the answer that came back from their allies in the new Africa: "Help us build sport."

Today even those in sport's sunlit uplands are responding to that cry. When he stood before the IOC in Singapore in 2005 to deliver the final pitch for London's 2012 Olympic bid, Sebastian Coe pledged millions in aid for SDP to benefit 12 million people in 20 countries. The IOC chose London over Paris, Moscow, Madrid and New York City in large part because of that commitment to "legacy." In its winning bid for the 2016 Olympics, Rio also distinguished itself over rivals such as Chicago with a superior commitment to grassroots sport. With the most recent World Cup and Commonwealth Games having taken place in South Africa and India, respectively, and the next World Cup and Olympics ticketed for Brazil, a legacy component for the developing world is the new normal for major global events.

## GET ON YOUR BOOTS

Players participate in soccer tournaments sponsored by the Mathare Youth Sports Association (MYSA) in Nairobi, a local nongovernment organization created to help the struggling children of the Mathare slum. DAI KUROKAWA/ EPA



But Kidd is among many students of the movement who sound cautionary notes. "It's woefully underfunded and highly uncoordinated," he tells me. "And it's completely unregulated and largely isolated from mainstream development efforts." At international conferences dedicated to SDP, delegates from the developing world complain about Westerners who parachute in with things that aren't wanted or needed. As Right To Play spearheads the handoff of responsibility to locals, such as a 500-person team in Liberia led by a former refugee who first encountered SDP in a displacement camp, Kidd credits Koss with leading a move away from "a top-down, we-know-what-you-need approach with First World volunteers."

Before the Brazilian national soccer team visited Port-au-Prince in 2004 to play its Haitian counterparts, organizers proposed offering free tickets to those who turned in a firearm, only to cancel the plan at the last minute out of security fears. Even so, without a long-term violence-reduction campaign, such an event would have been a one-off with limited impact. "More attention has to be paid to context," Kidd tells me. "It's got to be sport *plus*. Sport plus education, sport plus health, sport plus peace-building." For all its networking and digital platforms, SDP's biggest challenge may be coordination. "In Zambia, I saw kids in slums who'd been trained five or more times by different NGOs, while just outside the city there was

nothing," Kidd says. "NGOs aren't just fighting for donors, they're fighting for kids."

Or as Eli Wolff of Brown University's Sport and Development Project, who also coordinates the International Sport for Development and Peace Association, puts it, "There's been this boom, lots of networks and groups, but not really a professionalization of the field. There's no credentialing process or quality control, the way there is for teachers or lawyers. And there's the question, Is it effective?"



#### **DIGGING DEEP**

In the Nobel-nominated Mathare Youth Sports Association, players earn points in the standings for performing community service. DAI KUROKAWA/EPA

It's a familiar demand in sports: Show me the numbers. Is a program actually creating a positive outcome or just coinciding with it? "Because there's so much evidence that participation is a good thing, it's easy to assume that programs work," says Amy Farkas, a former sport-for-development specialist with UNICEF. "It's a lot easier to simply justify your program's existence than to do the hard work of justifying the impact of the intervention. That's why all sport-for-development programs need rigorous monitoring and evaluation."

Kidd believes the clamor for M & E, as it's known, can be taken too far. "People who have personal trainers, who choose schools for their kids based on athletic opportunities, tell us, 'Prove it! Prove that sport has

benefits!" he says. "That's where Johann has made a huge contribution. He continues to argue on the rights-based front."

But practitioners of all types recognize that funders are increasingly insisting on proof of results. "You're tempted to do sport for sport's sake, because it's fun," says Miles, the Grassroot Soccer executive. "We like it. But you have to show donors the outcomes."

## CHICAGO

**The Beyond Sport** Summit is a three-day mixer for all sides of SDP's triangle-problem, practitioner and patron. It's a place to shake loose funding and inspire others, and it serves as the Grammys of the field, a place to call attention to deserving programs. Dowdney, Clark and Tuohey turned up for the 2010 edition in Chicago, but so too did scores of first-timers, many with little more than a notion and a dream.

Since its founding in 2008, Beyond Sport, a London-based firm that helps match practitioners with corporate sponsors, has had a particular eye for the modest initiative that would have an enormous impact if only it could be replicated or scaled up. But even Beyond Sport can't recognize every worthy project. Cambodia, for instance, is a country whose 40,000 amputees, victims of some of the millions of mines laid during a decade of war, were long considered unemployable. Now more than 60% of the players in the Cambodian National Volleyball League-Disabled (CNVL-D), mostly demobilized soldiers from both sides of the conflict, hold jobs. Even more notably, with its sponsors and broad fan following, the league has so transformed public attitudes that many disabled Cambodians, athletic and not, now wear shorts to show off their prostheses. A league like the CNVL-D could flourish in virtually any postconflict part of the world.

Moving the Goalposts is another initiative ready for its scale-up. It offers soccer to Kenyan girls, who are much more likely than boys to be HIV-positive. The program distributes packs of sanitary pads imprinted with health messages, but it operates only in the coastal region of Kilifi-which invites the question, What if it had the funding to expand throughout sub-Saharan Africa?

Similarly, in barely five years Globalbike has touched the lives of some 400,000 people by supplying bicycles to frontline aid workers in Africa and Asia. A microfinance loan officer serving village artisans in Ethiopia, an engineer working to ensure clean water in Bolivia, a health worker

delivering vaccines in Zambia-each can see three times as many people and carry five times as much equipment by bike as on foot. A U.S.-based pro cycling team spreads word of Globalbike's impact so far, which suggests what could be accomplished if tens of thousands of bikes were delivered to the field.

No one in the developing world wants to depend on Western aid, so much buzz in the halls and breakout rooms in Chicago was about programs that have come up with their own revenue streams-groups such as Grupo Desportivo de Manica in Mozambique, a soccer club turned community hub that is building Futeco Park, three pitches girdled by 1,500 trees flush with mangos, lychees, oranges, avocados, guavas and papayas, which members will harvest and sell to fund the club's activities.

Indeed, there's a salutary realism amid all the idealism. John Sugden, an English sociologist who pioneered the "twinning" concept 25 years earlier with a mixed-faith soccer team in Belfast during the height of the Troubles and who is now the director of Football 4 Peace, doing in the Middle East with soccer what PPI does with basketball, puts it both wryly and well: "It's not as if you can sprinkle the pixie dust of sport and everything's going to be fine."

But sport does have its bewitching power, and for evidence a skeptic need only look at South Africa. Even in solitary confinement Nelson Mandela knew that many of his fellow black nationalists played soccer during their captivity on Robben Island. As he heard how the future leaders of his country brought the game to life with their own meticulously run Makana Football Association (MFA), Mandela recognized that soccer brought *them* to life-and he could imagine them in turn taking the obligations of democracy seriously. Since the fall of apartheid, former MFA players, referees and officials have served as South Africa's president, defense minister, minister for safety and security, deputy chief justice and sports minister, as well as provincial premiers and members of parliament. In prison Mandela began to recognize a truth he would articulate decades later as a free man: "Sport can create hope where once there was only despair. It is more powerful than governments in breaking down barriers. Sport has the power to change the world."

Mandela would demonstrate this masterfully as president of the new nation. Aware of the hold of rugby on the Afrikaaner imagination, he enlisted white captain Francois Pienaar to help him rally citizens of all races around the national team, the Springboks-long a symbol of white-minority rule-for the



1995 World Cup, which South Africa hosted and won. Says team manager Morne du Plessis of the story told in the film *Invictus*: "The very game that kept us apart for so long, he used to unite this country."

Thus modern South Africa owes its existence as a functioning, multiracial democracy partly to the braiding together of two epic sports stories—one from a largely black game, the other from a historically white one. Considering that sport, through the international boycott, helped do away with apartheid, it's not a bad showing for a few decades' work in one small corner of the globe.

Emmanuel Madonda grew up in Durban, South Africa's fourth-largest city, and now works for the Laureus Sport for Good Foundation. "I was 14 at the time of the '95 Rugby World Cup, and it was a pivotal moment for my country," he tells me during a break in the conference. "But even more powerful is the ongoing delivery of programming, of working deeply with young people. In Zulu we have this concept of *ubuntu* : 'I am because you are.' That is the essence of it."

Today sporting *ubuntu* extends from the street kid in Rio who, thanks to boxing, is transformed from avenging tough into potential Olympian; to the African AIDS orphan who, thanks to soccer, has a better chance of living long enough to raise children of her own; to the Arab girl in West Jerusalem who, thanks to basketball, feels bound to the fortunes of a Jewish Israeli player in the NBA. Yes, we look up to Mandela and Pienaar, and to former NBA star Dikembe Mutombo, the Congolese seven-footer who built a \$29 million hospital in his hometown of Kinshasa and received Beyond Sport's Humanitarian in Sport Award. We will always look up, because as fans it's in our nature to do so.

But as human beings there's something else in our nature, which leads us to look around. Our eyes meet those of others, whom we engage as opponents, teammates, collaborators, neighbors and there-but-for-the-grace-of-God versions of ourselves. As Mutombo told the gathering in Chicago, quoting a proverb of his people: "When you take the elevator to the top, please remember to send it back down so someone else might use it."